



# POSITIVE SIGNS

## Private Land Programs Deliver Quality *and* Quantity Mix

Story and Photos By Craig Bihle

Some of the best North Dakota wildlife habitat is surrounded by triangular yellow signs. That's a good sign, because the triangles are also welcome signs for hunters.

The three-sided signs mean the land behind is enrolled in one of several North Dakota Game and Fish Department private land programs. The landscape has more yellow this year than last, and with a recent budget boost, continuing approval by North Dakota hunters, and participation from landowners, program expansion is anticipated. That's another good sign.

"What we have on the North Dakota landscape are habitat-based access programs," says John Schulz, Game and Fish private lands section leader. "From native forest tracts in the northeast to Conservation Reserve Program grasslands in the southwest, hunters can find a variety of North Dakota game species and habitats, depending on what part of the state they're hunting in."

For fall 2002, hunters will find more than 224,000 acres of PLOTS – Private Land Open to Sportsmen. That's nearly 60,000 more acres than last year and twice the number of acres enrolled just four years ago. Schulz is confident the Department could add perhaps 50,000 new acres a year for the next several years.

"With the variety of programs that we have, and the new ones that we're developing, I think a half-million acres is certainly attainable," Schulz said of the Department's long-range benchmark.

"I think we have a lot of room to grow because of landowner interest in each of our programs, and the recent addition of three private lands biologists to concentrate on private lands program delivery in the field."

### Private Land Program Basics

The Game and Fish Department began working in earnest with private landowners in the late 1970s, following creation of the interest money fund and the state habitat stamp. Interest earned from the Game and Fish reserve fund, and money from the new stamp, was available to compensate private landowners in return for habitat creation or improvement, along with hunting access to the land.

In 1991 the Department organized these separate programs into one effort called the Private Land Initiative. At that time, the PLI budget was about \$2.3 million per biennium. With recent enhancements from the agency's reserve fund, authorized for use by Governor John Hoeven, the Game and Fish private lands budget will approach \$7 million per biennium.

That's a lot of money and each dollar spent is earmarked to meet one of three goals:

1. Conservation of habitats for fish and wildlife populations.
2. Provide landowners interested in wildlife conservation with cost-share assistance for developing and protecting wildlife habitat.
3. Provide public access to fish and wildlife resources on private land.

### Habitat-Based Access

Game and Fish staff emphasize the term "habitat-based" access. While every dollar spent on private lands programs is designed to generate more places for people to hunt, the private lands philosophy is that most acres should have wildlife habitat to offer the *potential* for quality hunting experiences.

"We may be one of the last states to consistently have habitat development, maintenance or improvement as part of private landowner agreements that have access features," Schulz stated. "We want to create habitat, or manage existing habitat, and we want to assist landowners in their desire for improving the quality of their land."

That's why the Game and Fish Department isn't interested in simply leasing access to agricultural land such as crop stubble fields or pasture. While a Private Land Open to Sportsmen tract could contain stubble or pasture, such features were likely added by the landowner at no cost to help square off a section to make boundary definition easier. In fact, Schulz says, both the habitat plot and CRP cost-share programs have a significant number of "throw-in" acres.

"Why go out and just buy access," Schulz asks, "when we have the opportunity for habitat, management of that habitat, and access?"

So far, that philosophy is working well, primarily because the current roster of programs presents several options for landowners. "The private lands program is voluntary, and landowners are looking for a way to get extra compensation on

---

*Game and Fish staff work hard to make sure land behind the triangular yellow signs is a desirable place to hunt.*

land they're not interested in farming anymore, Schulz said. "They have a variety of interests, and that's why it's so important that we offer a variety of choices."

### Programs Fit Many Operations

While all Game and Fish habitat-based access program signs are yellow triangles, they are not all the same. Each indicates the program under which the land is enrolled.

Following are summaries of the programs with the most land enrolled, and what they offer to hunters this fall in terms of acres and habitat types. Interested landowners can learn more about rental rates, cost-share potential and other details by contacting John Schulz, Game and Fish private lands section leader, at 701-328-6327; jschulz@state.nd.us; or one of the following private lands biologists. Bismarck – Doug Howie, 328-6333; Kevin Kading, 328-6371. Jamestown – Tom Jones, 253-6480. Dickinson – Ryan Huber, 227-7431. Lonetree WMA (Harvey area) – Caroline Littlefield, 324-2211.

CoverLocks for Conservation contact is Jon Roaldson, 328-6308; jroaldso@state.nd.us.

### CRP Cost-Share

2002 acres: about 110,000

Offers up to 50 percent cost-share on the cost of seed for establishing cover on land enrolled in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Conservation Reserve Program. In return, landowners allow walking access by hunters for the duration of the CRP contract.

This program was initiated several years ago in southwestern and south central counties as a way to provide some public access in areas where pheasant populations were highest. The program expanded into central and northwestern North Dakota, and since this spring has been available in north central and northeastern counties.

"One of the reasons we're moving into the north central and northeast is to develop more public access in the waterfowl areas," Schulz said of the counties where CRP land is likely to include wetlands as well. "We have at this point huge interest in that program in that part of the state."

In the southwest, where pheasants are the prime focus, moderate numbers of PLOTS areas have been added the past two seasons. Still, Schulz hopes the additional dollars and staff made available

this spring will allow for promotion of old programs and new programs that appeal to other landowners in the area. A couple of promising options are under development, and private lands staff will introduce those programs to landowners over the winter.

### Habitat Plots

2002 acres: About 82,000

Three to six year rental of newly established and/or existing cover that provides nesting, wintering or other key wildlife habitat. Habitat plot payments are based on soil rental rates in various regions of the state. "We should be competitive enough," Schulz said, "that our payments approximate what landowners could expect from per-acre rates for haying, grazing or leasing for cropland."

The habitat plot program has been popular since its inception more than 20 years ago. In the past, Game and Fish did not have enough money available to enroll all the landowners who wanted to participate. Now, Schulz said, the program can expand, perhaps to include longer-term contracts. Department staff might also have more options for working with landowners who have been enrolled in the habitat program for many years.

---

*Wherever possible, the Game and Fish Department is hoping to work with landowners who have land next to existing state wildlife management areas.*





### CoverLocks for Conservation

2002 acres: about 7,740

Designed to create winter cover for resident wildlife. Uses USDA Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program funds to establish 20-acre habitat complexes within priority watersheds. Involves up-front incentives and annual payments for habitat establishment and access for 30 years. Access also includes the entire quarter section that contains the CoverLock.

Since this program is just entering its second year, hunters will find CoverLocks habitat "in variable stages of development," says Ted Upgren, Game and Fish director of Missions in Woodlands Habitat and supervisor of the CoverLocks program.

A CoverLock includes 15 acres of grass and five acres of trees. The trees, of course, will take many years to mature, but the grasses will fill in quickly. "Within a year or two, those that were planted this spring will be nice," Upgren said.

The real bonus on CoverLocks tracts at this point is the 140 acres surrounding the block planting. While this portion is open to hunting access, it is still part of the landowner's agricultural operation. That acreage could contain grain stubble that might attract feeding waterfowl or upland birds, CRP grasslands, native prairie grasslands and wooded draws, and even some wetlands.

"People will find some pretty nice situations there," Upgren emphasized. "They will provide some good hunting opportunities."

### Native Forest Conservation

2002 acres: about 8,800

Provides multi-year rental payment for maintaining and protecting native woodland habitat on private land. In addition, Game and Fish has worked with many landowners on forest habitat improvement projects.

All of this acreage is in the Pembina Hills and Turtle Mountains and many tracts are next to Game and Fish wildlife management areas. Land enrolled in this program could harbor elk, moose, ruffed grouse and deer, as well as wetlands or small lakes for waterfowl hunting.

### State Waterbank

2002 acres: about 4,100

A cooperative program with the North Dakota Department of Agriculture, Game and Fish provides funds for 10-year contracts for wetland conservation along priority watersheds. Complexes enrolled using Game and Fish private lands funds have three or four upland acres for every wetland acre, so hunters could find waterfowl opportunities, and upland game or big game, depending on location.

### PLOTS Expectations

While the number of PLOTS acres is increasing every year, and Game and Fish private lands programs have a promising future, considerable North Dakota hunting will still take place on private land open only to those hunters who have permission. These individual relationships remain the backbone of North Dakota's hunting heritage, and they are the types of relationships "that we as an agency continue to promote and would like to see between the hunter and the landowner," Schulz said.

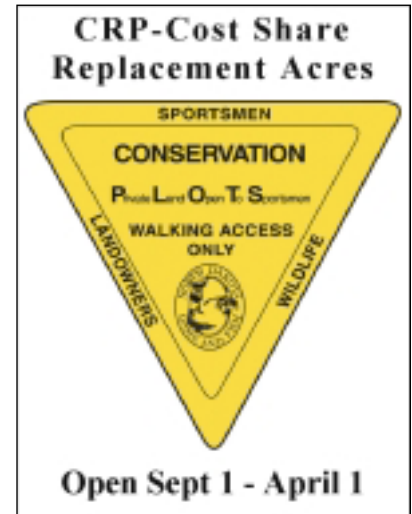
Just about every PLOTS tract can provide a quality hunt on the right day. However, they won't always provide shooting opportunities or competition-free space. Some are crowded at times and heavy hunting pressure can displace game. That's why most successful hunters will also identify and pursue options that include private land, public land and PLOTS.

When a hunter chooses a PLOTS tract, the Game and Fish Department wants that PLOTS to at least have potential. "We're spending several million dollars on these programs," Schulz stated. "Hunters want more land open to public access. Since they are also paying the bills, when they come across a PLOTS tract, it should look like a place someone would want to hunt."

"As long as we base our private land access programs on habitat first, hunters will get more value for their license dollar."

---

*CRAIG BIHRLE is the Game and Fish Department's communications supervisor.*



### Some PLOTS Tracts Opened to Emergency Haying in 2002

Many Game and Fish Private Land Open to Sportsmen tracts enrolled in the CRP cost-sharing program were opened to emergency haying this summer. Hunters who use PLOTS tracts may encounter some of these areas this fall.

As this issue went to press, private lands biologists were working with enrolled landowners to find ways to replace the temporary habitat loss. According to John Schulz, Game and Fish private lands section leader, the Department decided to allow up to 50 percent haying of CRP cost-share acres in exchange for two acres of additional access for one hunting season, or one acre of additional access for two hunting seasons, for every acre hayed.

In early August, about 5,000 acres had been hayed, meaning about 9,700 additional access acres available this fall. Some of that will stretch into the 2003 hunting season.

In the long term, Schulz said, periodic rotational haying – once every 4-5 years – of CRP cost-share tracts is beneficial. Mowing and baling removes excess plant litter and may improve plant diversity and structure, which favors reproduction efforts of ground nesting birds, and other resident wildlife seasonal habitat needs, Schulz noted.